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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6858
INFO RUEHHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 1833
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ASTANA 0013
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 4019
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 1157
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1927
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 6781
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 7747
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0259
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT 2568
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 4652
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 1339
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 9614
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000625

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SCUL](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT ORDERS ILLEGAL MOSQUES DEMOLISHED,
CLERICS DEFIANT

REF: A. ISLAMABAD 189

[¶](#)B. 06 ISLAMABAD 22572

[¶](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Pakistani government is pitted against Muslim hard-liners over the fate of illegally constructed mosques in Islamabad. The Capital Development Authority has demolished three mosques in the recent weeks and has its sights on dozens more. This is the centerpiece of a broader government attempt to crackdown on the misuse of mosques and madrassahs to spread sectarianism and violence. Clerics, madrassah students, and politicians from the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), an alliance of Islamist parties, have all lined up to oppose the government's actions. This confrontation takes on greater significance because elections are due in 2007. President Musharraf's ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) is increasingly at odds with the MMA and he wants to show progress on his "enlightened moderation" agenda. The religious parties are trying to exploit this mosque demolition issue for all its worth and the government is showing signs of backing down. END SUMMARY.

Mosques in Islamabad: Location, location, location

[¶](#)2. (SBU) Islamabad's Capital Development Authority (CDA) tore down two mosques on January 14 and 15, triggering a chain of events that has put the government and Muslim hard-liners on another collision course. (Note: The demolitions could not have taken place without high-level federal government approval, as the CDA chairman reports to the Minister of Interior Aftab Sherpao.) The CDA claims that scores of mosques and madrassahs have been built in and around Islamabad without proper construction permits and/or on seized patches of government land. The original design for the capital set aside generous space for mosques. What the city planners did not foresee forty years ago was the rise of sectarianism in Pakistan. Various Sunni sects (e.g., Barelvi, Deobandi, and Ahl-i-Hadith) and the Shias each wants separate mosques and madrassahs for their followers. For ambitious mullahs, sites in the capital area bring influence

and prestige.

¶ 13. (U) Islamabad is going through a period of rapid growth and construction. Mosques once put up on the sly now stand in the path of development projects and road expansions. The government reckons that of 322 total mosques and madrassahs in the capital region, 84 are unauthorized and a further 184 violate building rules -- leaving only 54 legitimate ones in the CDA's eyes. The government considers these to be a serious security threat as well as a nuisance. An estimated 12,000 to 15,000 students attend the illegal madrassahs; two of the demolished mosques abutted roads used by VIP motorcades; and the government fears the madrassahs are breeding grounds for sectarianism and violence.

Drawing the line: Madrassah girls occupy library in protest

¶ 14. (SBU) Resistance to the demolition firmed up after January 20, when the CDA razed the Amir Hamza mosque and served evacuation notices to dozens of other unauthorized mosques and madrassahs (including the Hamsa madrassah for girls). The CDA alleges that Hamsa -- centrally located and linked with the influential, reportedly Saudi-funded Lal mosque -- illegally occupied its site adjacent to a public children's library. (Note: Lal mosque is particularly problematic because it preaches vitriol and has routinely been the source of violent protests. Police arrested several Lal mosque leaders January 19.) The female madrassah students responded to the CDA's threat by taking over the children's library and have stayed put for almost two weeks. These burqa-clad schoolgirls have garnered widespread media attention.

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Mullahs 1, PML 0: Government loses this round

¶ 15. (SBU) The government's position began to crack a few days into the Hafsa madrassah protest. MMA leaders, including Qazi Hussain Ahmed and Fazlur Rehman, rallied around the students' cause. In the face of a losing public relations battle, Minister Sherpao and other government officials decided to temporarily halt the CDA's demolitions and try to resolve the stand-off through dialogue with the clerics. The government is touting a truce whereby the CDA will provide alternate locations for the razed mosques, but the clerics have not agreed to a deal -- they realize how effective the protesting madrassah girls have been. On February 1, the students even raised their demands to include the imposition of Sharia law in Pakistan.

Comment

¶ 16. (SBU) The PML won the last stand-off with the Muslim hard-liners when the MMA leaders could not agree whether to resign after the Womens Protection Bill passed in December 2006 (reftels). Now the PML finds itself outmaneuvered on this issue and is unwilling to risk the political fall-out of marching on with the demolition plan. Even if the government is able to clinch a deal to remove other illegal mosques and madrassahs, it will be at a significant cost -- donating other land as compensation, paying for some of the reconstruction, and rejuvenating the MMA's fortunes which had been floundering in recent months.

BODDE